



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK



The Country Context Prior to The Elections, with Geographic Specificity and Special Attention to The Situation of Women and Young People

1. Introduction and Purpose

The Gambia will hold its next presidential election on 5 December 2026, with National Assembly elections to follow on 10 April 2027.¹ This will be only the third presidential election since the country's transition from 22 years of authoritarian rule under Yahya Jammeh, and it comes at a moment of real political uncertainty. Incumbent President Adama Barrow is seeking a third term, a move that has drawn criticism given his earlier pledge to serve only one term and to support constitutional reform introducing presidential term limits. Two attempts to pass a new constitution, in 2020 and again in 2025, have failed to secure the required support in the National Assembly, leaving the country's 1997 constitution, and its lack of retroactive term limits, in place heading into the vote.²

This report sets out the country context ahead of the election, with particular attention to how that context varies across The Gambia's regions and how it is experienced differently by women and young people. It is intended to give partners and stakeholders a grounded picture of the conditions under which the 2026 election will take place.

2. National Political Context

The 2026 election is widely seen as a test of whether The Gambia can consolidate the democratic gains made since 2016 or whether executive power will again become entrenched. President Barrow's National People's Party (NPP) enters the race with the advantages of incumbency, including access to state resources and patronage networks that tend to favor rural strongholds. The opposition remains fragmented. The country's largest opposition party, the United Democratic Party, has put forward veteran politician Ousainou Darboe, who placed second to Barrow in 2021 with 28 percent of the vote, as its flagbearer. Other declared candidates include Mama Kandeh of the Gambia Democratic Congress, who won 12 percent in 2021, and a number of independent candidates and smaller parties. With 19 or more

¹Independent Electoral Commission, 'Electoral Calendar 2026–2027' (IEC) <<https://iec.gm/electoral-calendar-2026-2027/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

²Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'The Gambia: Challenges of Exiting the Gravitational Pull of Autocracy' (Africa Center, 10 February 2026) <<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-elections-2026/gambia/>> accessed 2 July 2026.



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registered political parties and the fragmentation of the opposition field works in the incumbent's favor.³

Economic conditions add pressure to the political climate. An estimated 53 percent of Gambians live below the poverty line, a legacy in part of the stagnation of the Jammeh years.⁴ While the economy is projected to grow by around 5.8 to 6 percent in 2025 and 2026, inflation of roughly 10 percent means that growth is not being felt in most households' cost of living. Public debt remains high, with a debt-to-GDP ratio in the range of 70 to 75 percent, which constrains government spending on the social services and job creation that voters, especially younger voters, consistently say they care most about.⁵

Political competition in The Gambia has also tended to fall along ethnic and regional lines, particularly between the NPP and UDP support bases, a pattern that civil society groups warn risks hardening into tribalism if left unaddressed by leaders and media on all sides.⁶ At the same time, recent by-elections, most notably in Masembeh, which GP observed, have shown that the outcome of individual contests is not a foregone conclusion, and that voter frustration with the cost of living and service delivery is a live factor that could shape turnout and results in December.⁷

3. Geographic Specificity

The Gambia's 2024 Population and Housing Census recorded a national population of just over 2.4 million people, with women making up 51 to 52 percent and men 48 to 49 percent.⁸ The population is heavily concentrated in the west of the country. Brikama, which covers the entire West Coast Region, is now home to close to half of the national population, having grown by 67 percent since the 2013 census. Kanifing, the country's second most populous local government area, has under 380,000 residents by comparison.⁹

³Africa Center for Strategic Studies (n 2).

⁵Malagen, 'Beyond Tribe and Personality: Why The Gambia Needs Issue-Based Politics in 2026' (Malagen, 2 January 2026) <<https://malagen.org/opinions/beyond-tribe-and-personality-why-the-gambia-needs-issue-based-politics-in-2026/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

⁶Malagen (n 3).

⁷The Alkamba Times, 'Editorial: The Massembeh By-Elections – A Litmus Test for Gambia's Opposition Ahead of 2026' (The Alkamba Times, 23 February 2025) <<https://alkambatimes.com/editorial-the-massembeh-by-elections-a-litmus-test-for-gambias-opposition-ahead-of-2026/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

⁸UNFPA The Gambia, 'Preliminary Report of the 2024 Census in The Gambia' (UNFPA, 24 February 2026) <<https://gambia.unfpa.org/en/publications/preliminary-report-2024-census-gambia>> accessed 2 July 2026.

⁹Askanwi, 'FactSheet: Almost Half of Gambia's Population Live in the West Coast' (Askanwi, 29 March 2026) <<https://www.askanwi.com/feature-publications/factsheet-almost-half-of-gambias-population-live-in-the-west-coast>> accessed 2 July 2026.

Banjul itself is the exception to this pattern of growth, having lost around 15 percent of its population since 2013 as residents move to more affordable areas on the city's outskirts.¹⁰ Together, Banjul, Kanifing and the West Coast Region account for roughly 64 percent of the national population, meaning that most Gambians, and most voters, now live in and around the greater Banjul urban and peri-urban corridor rather than in the country's more rural provinces.¹¹

The remaining regions, including the North Bank Region, Lower River Region, Central River Region and Upper River Region, are smaller in population but carry a disproportionate share of the country's poverty. National reporting has consistently found that poverty is largely a rural phenomenon, concentrated in these provincial regions where paved roads, electricity, telecommunications and modern sanitation are less available, and where more households depend on subsistence agriculture.¹²

This geographic imbalance has direct implications for the 2026 election. Population growth in the West Coast Region and Kanifing means these areas carry significant electoral weight and are likely to see the heaviest campaigning, media coverage and civic education activity. By contrast, the more sparsely populated and poorer provincial regions, particularly the Lower River Region, Central River Region and Upper River Region, are at greater risk of being underserved by both official voter information and independent fact-checking efforts, even though their communities face acute and sometimes distinct governance challenges tied to service delivery, land and agricultural livelihoods. Civil society and media literacy programming that concentrates only on the Greater Banjul Area risks leaving a meaningful share of the electorate, and a disproportionate share of the country's poorest citizens, with less access to credible, verified information ahead of the vote.

4. Situation of Women

Women make up more than half of The Gambia's population and, by most estimates, close to 58 percent of registered voters, yet they remain sharply underrepresented in political leadership.¹³ Depending on the source and point in the current electoral cycle, women hold somewhere between 3 and 5 of the 58 seats in the National Assembly, roughly 8 to 9 percent, and a similarly small share of Cabinet and ministerial positions, generally cited as 3 out of around 22 to 23 posts. At the local government level, women make up under 15 percent of

¹⁰Askanwi (n 8).

¹¹Foroyaa Newspaper, 'Population Census 2024 Revealed' (Foroyaa, 14 September 2024) <<https://foroyaa.net/population-census-2024-revealed/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹²United Nations Economic and Social Council, National Report of The Gambia (UN) <https://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/newfunct/pdf14/gambia_nr.pdf> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹³Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 'The Gambia' (WFD) <<https://www.wfd.org/where-we-work/gambia>> accessed 2 July 2026.

ward councilors, and no woman has ever been elected President of The Gambia. These figures fall well short of the 30 percent critical mass recommended under the Beijing Platform for Action.¹⁴

Civil society and international partners have been increasingly vocal on this gap heading into 2026. In December 2025, eighteen of the country's registered political parties signed a communiqué committing to gender-sensitive electoral reforms, including a proposed 30 percent gender quota within party leadership and candidate nomination processes, lower nomination fees for women candidates, and stronger protections against violence targeting women in politics.¹⁵ Separately, advocates and human rights commissioners have pushed for a constitutional amendment that would create 14 reserved seats for women in the National Assembly, two per administrative region, alongside two reserved seats for persons with disabilities. As of early 2026, this bill had not yet passed, and commissioners have warned that any new electoral law must be enacted well before the December vote to take effect.¹⁶

Research into the cost of politics in The Gambia has found that financial barriers fall particularly hard on women, who often have less access to campaign financing, party resources and independent income than male aspirants.¹⁷ Beyond financing, women who do contest elections report facing distinct forms of political violence and intimidation, sometimes described as violence against women in politics, alongside discriminatory social norms about women's roles in public life.¹⁸ Women also make up over 70 percent of agricultural labour in The Gambia, which means that economic hardship in rural, farming-dependent regions tends to weigh especially heavily on women's daily lives and, by extension, on the issues they most want candidates to address.¹⁹ Civic education and anti-corruption programming that treats women purely as voters, without also building pathways for women as candidates, election

¹⁴International IDEA, 'National Conference: Advancing Women's Political Participation and Representation in The Gambia' (International IDEA, 4 March 2026) <<https://www.idea.int/news/national-conference-advancing-womens-political-participation-and-representation-gambia>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹⁵International IDEA, '18 Political Parties Endorse Landmark Communiqué on Women's Political Participation in The Gambia' (International IDEA, 18 December 2025) <<https://www.idea.int/news/18-political-parties-endorse-landmark-communique-womens-political-participation-gambia>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹⁶The Point, 'Advocates Push for Constitutional Amendment for 14 Reserved Seats for Women in Parliament' (The Point, 27 March 2026) <<https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/advocates-push-for-constitutional-amendment-for-14-reserved-seats-for-women-in-parliament>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹⁷The Point, 'Renewed Calls to Boost Women in Gambian Politics' (The Point, 25 March 2026) <<https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/renewed-calls-to-boost-women-in-gambian-politics>> accessed 2 July 2026.

¹⁹UNFPA The Gambia, 'Women's Representation in Politics: The Pathway to Achieving a Sustainable Future' (UNFPA, 10 May 2025) <<https://gambia.unfpa.org/en/news/womens-representation-politics-pathway-achieving-sustainable-future>> accessed 2 July 2026.



officials and civil society leaders, risks missing a significant part of what stakeholders across the political spectrum have identified as an urgent reform agenda ahead of 2026.

5. Situation of Young People

The Gambia has one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age of under 19²⁰ and children and young people making up roughly 70 percent of the national population.²¹ This youthful demographic profile means that young Gambians, broadly defined as those under 35, will make up a decisive share of the 2026 electorate, and their outlook on politics, the economy and information is central to how the election unfolds.

That outlook is shaped heavily by economic hardship. According to the Gambia Bureau of Statistics' 2025 Labour Force Survey, 41.3 percent of young Gambians are not in education, employment or training, a rate that rises to 45.3 percent among young women compared with 36.6 percent among young men.²² In interviews ahead of the 2026 vote, young Gambians have repeatedly pointed to unemployment and the rising cost of living as their central concerns, with many saying that repeated political promises on job creation have yet to translate into real opportunities.²³ This frustration coexists with genuine enthusiasm for the democratic process itself. Youth advocates have urged their peers to register and vote, framing participation as a right that young Gambians fought for through the 2016 transition, and pointing to youth-led political change elsewhere in the region, notably in Senegal, as a sign of what organised youth engagement can achieve.²⁴

At the same time, young Gambians face structural barriers to moving from civic engagement into political leadership itself. High nomination fees, patronage networks within parties, and youth wings that function more as mobilising tools than genuine leadership pathways have all been cited as obstacles to young people running for office in their own right, rather than simply turning out to vote for older candidates.²⁵ This combination of economic frustration, high civic energy and limited access to leadership roles makes young people both a critical audience for civic education and fact-checking programming and a group whose

²⁰Worldometer, 'Gambia Population (2026)' (Worldometer) <<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/gambia-population/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

²¹Foroyaa (n 9).

²²Malagen (n 3).

²³Voice Gambia, 'Gambian Youths Decry Unemployment, Rising Cost of Living Ahead of 2026 Polls' (Voice Gambia, 13 May 2026) <<https://www.voicegambia.com/2026/05/13/gambian-youths-decry-unemployment-rising-cost-of-living-ahead-of-2026-polls/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

²⁴Voice Gambia, 'UK-Based Gambian Says Political Environment Not in Favor of Youth Leadership' (Voice Gambia, 23 February 2026) <<https://www.voicegambia.com/2026/02/23/uk-based-gambian-says-political-environment-not-in-favor-of-youth-leadership/>> accessed 2 July 2026.





disillusionment, if left unaddressed, could translate into either apathy or susceptibility to polarising and false narratives during the campaign period.

6. The Information Environment and Emerging Risks

The information environment ahead of the 2026 election carries risks that go beyond those seen in 2021. Gambia Participates' own maiden Corruption Index found that 89.8 percent of respondents perceive corruption as highly or very highly widespread in the country, with education ranked among the more affected institutional sectors, findings that create fertile ground for both genuine grievance and opportunistic misinformation during the campaign.²⁶ Media monitoring groups that tracked the 2021 election found it to be the most contested in the country's history, and also the one with the highest levels of hate speech, disinformation and personal attacks, driven in part by wider social media access across generations.²⁷ There is little reason to expect the 2026 contest, fought under a similarly fragmented and high-stakes political landscape, to be calmer.

Artificial intelligence adds a new dimension to this risk. Global analysts tracking the 2026 election cycle have flagged mis- and disinformation, much of it increasingly AI-generated, as one of the top short-term global risks of the year, with deepfake video and audio content becoming harder to distinguish from genuine material even as it becomes cheaper and easier to produce.²⁸ Research on West Africa suggests that limited and costly internet access has so far restricted the spread of sophisticated deepfakes in the region compared with cheaper, simpler forms of manipulated content, but experts caution that this gap is likely to narrow as AI tools become more accessible.²⁹ The Gambia already has a small but active fact-checking community working alongside international fact-checking networks, but the general public, and particularly audiences outside the Greater Banjul Area, have had far less exposure to structured fact-checking or media literacy training than journalists have.³⁰

Taken together, the concentration of population and campaign activity in the west of the country, the underrepresentation of women in political leadership, the economic frustration of a very young electorate, and a fast-evolving disinformation landscape point to a set of interconnected risks for the credibility and peacefulness of the 2026 election. They also point to where civic education, fact-checking and anti-corruption programming can have the most

²⁶Gambia Participates, Gambia Corruption Index (Gambia Participates, 2025) (internal publication, on file with Gambia Participates).

²⁷Malagen (n 3).

²⁸World Economic Forum, 'How Cognitive Manipulation and AI Will Shape Disinformation in 2026' (World Economic Forum, 12 March 2026) <<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/03/how-cognitive-manipulation-and-ai-will-shape-disinformation-in-2026/>> accessed 2 July 2026.

²⁹Times of Oman, 'AI Disinformation Could Threaten Africa's Elections' (Times of Oman) <<https://timesofoman.com/article/155412-ai-disinformation-could-threaten-africas-elections>> accessed 2 July 2026.

³⁰Askanwi (n 8); Malagen (n 3).





impact, namely in reaching underserved provincial regions, building women's pathways into political leadership rather than only their turnout as voters, channelling youth frustration into constructive civic engagement, and equipping citizens across the country, not only professional journalists, with the tools to recognise manipulated content before it shapes their vote.

7. Implications for Programming

This context reinforces several priorities for Gambia Participates' ongoing work under the EPSG program. First, geographic reach matters as much as content quality. Extending fact-checking and civic education activities beyond the Greater Banjul Area and West Coast Region into the Lower River, Central River, Upper River and North Bank Regions would help close an access gap that current population and poverty data suggest is real and growing. Second, programming aimed at women should go beyond voter turnout messaging to support the pipeline of women candidates, election officials and civil society leaders that party-level reforms and proposed reserved seats are trying to build. Third, youth-focused activities should treat economic frustration as a legitimate entry point for civic engagement rather than a distraction from it, connecting anti-corruption and accountability messaging directly to the jobs, cost of living and service delivery concerns that young Gambians consistently raise. Finally, given the accelerating risk of AI-generated disinformation, continued investment in practical, community-level digital verification skills, of the kind piloted through GP's recent capacity building workshops, will be essential to keeping pace with a threat that is evolving faster than most institutions' capacity to respond to it.



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